BREAKING THE ICE: A DIALOGUE WITH SIMON PERCHIK

An Interview by Susan Tepper

INT: You have a daily writing routine. How do you start the process moving?

SP: I work with a group of photographs, and I start with the first photograph in the collection, working through to the last. I begin by describing in prose what I see in the photo (this is a so and so) for maybe six or seven pages. Keeping the photo in view, I then turn to a book on mythology, like Hamlet's Mill, or a science book, and I'll get an idea and think: what does this have to do with what's in the photograph? So I set up a situation, and try to solve it. Though it's seemingly disparate, contradictory, I think about it, then suddenly it has everything in the world to do with it. Then I have my hook, and I start with that. Ninety-nine percent of the time, the hook will disappear in the process. For instance, I'm writing about a picture of a toaster, reading a book about astronomy, and the sun comes up, and I think: what's a sun got to do with a toaster? Sun is hot, toaster is hot, toaster has a war-like image (iron, chrome) a battle aspect, and the sun has heat, the sun's out all night and stars need to be reheated, a toaster heats bread. But the final poem has no sun, no stars, no toaster!

INT: The photo is used to jog your mind?

SP: Correct. It's a catalyst to get the process going, get the pen flowing. Your hand is moving and your brain is trying to keep track of it. The catalyst is trying to connect an image with an idea. Even if they disappear in the process, something comes of it. New things come in that take precedence. Ninety-nine percent of the time, the originating image and idea disappear in the final poem.

INT: With Hamlet's Mill, do you open randomly and start reading?

SP: I start on page one until I get what I want, then mark the page and close the book and write without the book. I've got my idea. When I've finished the poem, and I'm about to start another, I begin at the marked page, until I go through the whole book. The book may take two years to finish.

INT: You write in cafes, in longhand?

SP: Yeah. (laughs) My handwriting is terrible, and I have to re-type them. I write very fast, so as not to lose the idea. I write in cafes because writing's a very lonely business and I think I'd go mad if I had to write by myself. I like commotion. I'm listening with my walkman to Beethoven, Mahler, Mozart, the whole time I'm writing the poem. Only when I'm reading the science or myth, I'm not listening to music, to concentrate and not be distracted. Once I get my idea from the science or myth, I put my earphones back on, and I'm in business.

INT: Does the music feed into the poem?

SP: I don't know for sure about that, though it may be taking place subconsciously, because my opening lines are Beethoven chords. A strong opening line which is Beethoven, he's powerful. And the music also is very abstract and my work is getting more abstract, and I'm sure the music has influenced that. I don't do much narrative, less and less, and the story line is zero, so most of the poems are ephemeral, touching the subconscious, like music. You know, you don't listen to Mahler and ask, "What's he saying?" Without the music I wouldn't be able to get through it.

INT: You do this every day, from nine in the morning?

SP: Every day. Susan, when I was writing The Family of Man, using the 482 photos, I thought: this is great 'cause I'm never going to live to finish this, so I'd say to God: Listen, can't you see I'm busy here -- go bother Susan! (laughter) But when I started to see that I might live long enough to finish this thing -- I was working seven days a week, 365 days a year -- in the middle of all this I went down to New Orleans with my wife, Mickey, and her sister. They went and did the tours, about two weeks down there, and the whole time I was sitting in a cafeteria, writing! My sister-in-law thought I was nuts. This cavernous cafeteria in the basement of a department store. Toward the end of the week the employees all knew me, they were probably thinking: who's this guy, an inspector? They all wanted to see what I was writing! There I was, travelling all that distance to sit in a cafeteria. Paying all that money to do the same thing I do at home.

INT: Because you have to do this work.

SP: Yes. Listen, either you do it or you don't do it. The poem doesn't get finished by itself, if I'm going to finish this book, 482 photographs, I have to do this. The Family of Man took eight years. When I finished, I walked from East Hampton to Bridgehampton. I do that when I finish, I take these long walks, then I get a little rest before I start the next book.

INT: From the moment you look at a photo, is the poem starting to cook?

SP: No! (groans) I wish it was that way. I start with the prose, just writing what I see in the picture, and I'll be thinking: where am I going, what am I doing? I'll never get through this. Just writing with nothing in my head, absolutely zero in my head. Except a sense of doom -- it's like the monsoons! They always come, but you're never sure.

INT: Have you always worked with photographs?

SP: No, but I worked from images, things I'd see -- a bunch of birds on a clothesline. I did start with photographs early. This photographer I knew had some photos, and I said, "Okay, Larry, let me write to your photographs and what your photographs have in, I'll leave out. We'll do them as sets, print the photograph, print the text." We did about six of them, and a magazine called The Outsider, in Louisiana, printed a couple. Beautiful. If you can ever get a copy -- they're rare now. I almost got a book out of that, but it fell through.

INT: Disappointing.

SP: Yeah, but from that I got the idea -- well now I'll write to photographs. And a couple of them appeared in poetry magazines. Back in those days I only wrote over the summer, when I had a vacation from work.

INT: In your methodology when do you abstract?

SP: At the end. Something has to surface first. If I'm going to abstract a barn, first I have to have the barn. The abstraction comes after I get the idea, and a little bit of narrative -- in a sense that I know what's going on. It's a poem, not an essay or lecture. So I'm going to approach the reader subconsciously, by trying to pick words that will accomplish what I want to have accomplished, without telling them!

INT: How long do you work on a poem?

SP: A week, two weeks. Every day at least three to four hours.

INT: Earthly things -- stones, clams, apples -- fill your poems, yet there's always this pull toward primordial origins.

SP: How that happens, I don't know. But I'm comfortable with those images (stones, etc) these are things that are around me. You know, however a poem begins it always ends in a cemetery. Stones are in the cemetery. Then I'm out there at the docks where there's a big stone jetty. So these are things around me. Neruda would always be writing about rocks. If you see it all day long, it's naturally going to turn up in the work. Apples is another primordial image, apples is a big symbol.

INT: When you use clams and stones and apples, you're not really writing about those things at all.

SP: That's correct. Talk about clams -- one of the last poems I've written -- I'm standing on Broadway and I hear the subway underneath, and all of a sudden I'm a clammer, feeling with my feet -- on Broadway. But the clams aren't there, there's the subway there, an enclosure – like a clam. And the subway doors open just like a clam shell opens. And here I am, clamming on Broadway! Somebody reading this poem might say: What the hell is going on? But I'm actually clamming with my bare feet on Broadway, on top of the subway tracks! Then the tracks come in to the poem, and there's the subway and tracks, and maybe there's going to be a suicide and a guy's going to jump. And then in the poem I say: No, I don't jump. Though I lead the reader into it, the suicide, then I cut that avenue off. But also by cutting it off, I also suggest it. So this is the sort of thing that goes on. Though where it comes from, God only knows. The clamming comes because I'm out there [East Hampton] and I used to clam all summer. I don't clam anymore, there's no clams left. So if I'm writing a poem about the subway, the relationship between a subway car and a clam is pretty easy.

INT: You twist your images so quickly that the poet David Ignatow advised throwing aside the rules of syntax when reading your poems. I find it like jumping into a pool of water and just letting go.

SP: If there's a point in my writing a poem where it hasn't jelled yet, 'cause I don't really know what I'm doing till it's over, and there is a point in this process where I say: I've got to get into this poem, somewhere. And it is like jumping into a pool of water.

INT: They give the sense of being carried into another world, then back. We're on earth, but also not on earth; as if you've penetrated that wall between the known and unknown.

SP: You're right. I'm pretty conscious that I do that, 'cause if you don't do that, if you don't make it a little mysterious, a little spooky -- maybe spooky is the word -- where you don't know where you are -- if you actually feel you're losing control inside the poem, while you're reading it, that's power. It's like listening to Beethoven, or Mahler. I listen to Mahler's Songs on the Death of Children and I feel like jumping out the window. You are just transformed by sounds, and that's power. And I like that. If I don't do that, then you'll know where you are and you'll feel comfortable. If I don't know where I am, why should you? (both laugh).

INT: Yet by the end there's always a feeling of resolution. Even if we're completely turned around and don't know where we are, they end perfect.

SP: I'm happy if that's taking place. I don't know if I'm conscious of it. In an introduction to Hands Collected, Robert Peters, a very good poet, said -- You can be sure he'll whirl you

around but he'll let you down safely. I'm not conscious that I've got any kind of a structure to a poem, I don't consciously try for that. Maybe it happens the way it happens. The letting down, I don't do that consciously, I just feel that that's the way the poem should end.

INT: The late poet Paul Blackburn called your poems: "...often terrifying compressions of the violence in simple daily acts".

SP: I do like the images to be commonplace. I don't want something nobody's ever seen before, I want something the reader can identify
with but see it differently. I would like to write a poem about a door knob, so that when you open a door and touch that door knob, it'll be different from that day on. But I want the end result to be that I will transform that commonplace image -- door knob, toaster, bottle -- to be looked at differently after reading what I wrote. Paul [Blackburn] saw it as violence but I see it as normal. I met Paul at NYU. I was writing a little -- nothing like today. In those days, I couldn't have been writing more than one or two poems a year. I was headed for law school but I hung out with Paul and Alfred Chester. Paul taught me to make the leaps, to make the reader jump, and he told me you don't have to rhyme! None of that rhyming shit, and that made it a lot easier!

INT: Were you guys considered beat poets?

SP: Not me. Paul was. I was a little on the outside, I wasn't writing like they were writing, with that kind of intensity. I felt that that was no life, I played it safe, 'cause I could see those guys living in furnished rooms by themselves, bitter old men. I needed a family, a job. Unless you can get a job teaching -- but you don't know that when you start out.

INT: Did the poems come immediately after law school?

SP: From 1950 to 1960 I didn't write a word. Then in the sixties I started writing during the summers, when I had time off from work.

INT: Your first book I Counted Only April came out in 1964. Was it difficult finding a publisher?

SP: The publisher for that one was Jim Weil, we're still friends. He ran a magazine called Elizabeth, and I had the Dustbooks directory and sent him a few poems which he took, then eventually he asked would I like to have a chapbook out. Elizabeth Press did six books in total. (Note: books are in the Library of Congress, Rare Book Collection) Almost all my books
have been through contacts with editors of small magazines. The only game in town is the small magazine. I use the Dustbooks directory and Poets Market and I go from A to Z. Twice a

year. By the time you get the directory a lot are already out of business. So there's about three hundred magazines you can send to.

INT: You address three hundred envelopes twice a year?

SP: And the return envelopes. It takes two minutes--boom boom!

INT: Right! (both laugh)

SP: Three poems in each envelope, three hundred envelopes twice a year. I have an index, to keep track. Otherwise it would get kind of tough, especially with The Family of Man, there's close to five hundred poems there. The problem is -- and I don't know if you're experiencing this -- but a lot of the editors now, for some reason or other, they don't even send back the submission. You don't get a rejection slip, even. For a beginner, it could wipe them out. Beginners are very frail.

INT: You've published hundreds and hundreds of poems. Is anybody out there published as much as you?

SP: Dustbooks has this thing called The Sweepstakes. Of course, Lyn Lifshin is mentioned tops. I was four, then three, then two, and two again, behind Lyn. And the joke was: should I get the mob after her, 'cause that's the only way I'll get to be number one! (laughter) Now I'm back to whatever. I don't know what I'll be this year.

INT: How much of what you send out is accepted?

SP: Very little. Susan, it's not an easy world out there. Just because you got in somewhere, doesn't mean you're going to continue to get in. You have to have a skin like an elephant. If you write just to get published, you're going to get into a bind. When I get an envelope back, I expect to get a rejection. Even after all these years.

INT: Which poets have influenced you?

SP: Neruda is gold. And Aleixandre, but you've got to watch who is translating him. I like the strength of Baudelaire.

INT: Yet you write like none of those, your work has its own definitive imprint.

SP: I'd like to think that I'm doing something different, that I'm moving more and more away from the narrative, from the statement. I want the reader to say: I don't know what this is, I just feel differently. I think that's where the power is, like music.

INT: Is death a recurring theme?

SP: Sure, stones is death, everything is death. Between love and death, I don't know what else to write about.

INT: How do you choose your titles?

SP: All the books have been named by the publishers. I don't even title the poems, I use an asterisk (*) for every one. I don't want the reader locked into a meaning or idea because of a title.

INT: You don't give many readings, why?

SP: I like to think the poems are getting more and more abstract, which makes listening more difficult. Like a De Kooning painting -- you don't say: where's the cow, where's the barn? It's all there. I
read once a year with Ed [Edward Butscher] at Canio's [Bookstore in Sag Harbor]. There's one poem I couldn't get through. Afterward, somebody in the audience said: I wish you could have seen your face, how distorted it became -- while I was reading it and couldn't get through. So the next year, I tried again.

INT: Same poem?

SP: Same poem. Didn't even get as far as I did the first time. Something in that poem I just cannot get through. Like the Gandolf Poems. Too emotional. I try to present it so it's different for the listener, but apparently there's enough of me in there to make it difficult.

INT: Yet you say you feel exorcised while writing.

SP: When it's over. Something's there that wasn't there, and I feel better. Every poem I'm writing, I think, is about death.

INT: During war time you were a pilot -- planes, cockpits, aerial images appear again and again. Goethe wrote: "Poetic content, however, is the content of one's own life."

SP: It's all my life.

Sample:

--snowfall over snowfall
the way a cockpit canopy
climbing till its glass frosts over
scatters into the blue mist
that will flood and the Earth
already begins to open :each Spring

(observe the "displaced colon" in last line of stanza)

INT: Why the displaced colon?

SP: To let the reader know that a metaphor is taking place, telling them to stop and compare, without the statement -- this is like this. It's like flying a flag upside down -- a distress signal, alerting you of something unusual. I also picked the colon because it affects the rhythm, so there's a kinetic affect. I try to do it in one long gasping breath. For tension. Tension is everything in art, music.

INT: Is time, linear or otherwise, relevant to the poems?

SP: I don't intentionally guide the poem along in that way. Mine don't have that kind of structure. They just begin and end. I think
the real world is in my writing. It may come out as abstract, but it goes in real, to be abstracted. I use hands a lot, and stones, cups, and tables.

INT: And candy bars. It seems that you are reaching down to primitive origins, taking everything apart, down to the essence.

...as if some candy bar once unsealed
would flow again -- (Letters to the Dead)

SP: That's exactly what I try to do. I try to reach back so you almost feel as if you are the first life form on earth, the first living cell, and you feel the kinship with inanimate material like stones. All out of this cosmic dust that floated around. All inter-connected, whether it's stone, cloth, or a bone.

INT: This is only the third interview you've allowed?

SP: That's true.

INT: At their most abstract, your poems have been likened to paintings in the surrealist mode. De Kooning said about Pollock's drip paintings: "He broke the ice". Have you broken the ice?

SP: I would like to break the ice. I don't think I've broken the ice. What I would like to be said is: He tried to take poetry into a ninety-degree turn.

-- Susan Tepper
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